

Navy Medicine at War: Stories of Service and Sacrifice at the Battle of the Coral Sea

U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

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Following the fall of Corregidor and Singapore, the Imperial Japanese Navy shifted their focus to Port Moresby, the strategically important capital of Papua New Guinea. Their goal: to cut off allied supply lines to Australia. Standing in their way were two Navy U.S. Carrier Task Forces and an Australian cruiser force who steamed into the Coral Sea in early May 1942.

The ensuing fight—known as the Battle of the Coral Sea—was fought primarily by carrier-based planes across this marginal sea off the northeast coast of Australia from May 4 to 8, 1942. Throughout the battle, Navy medical personnel serving shipboard played important roles keeping our Sailors in the fight while providing life-saving medical care under the severest of conditions. These are some of their stories.

The Loss of the "Lady Lex":

On the morning of May 8, 1942, Japanese naval forces in the Coral Sea unleashed an attack on U.S. naval carriers Yorktown (CV-5) and Lexington (CV-2). The Lexington suffered direct hits from torpedo bombers on her port side at 1120. She was hit again by Japanese carrier bombers leading to flooded compartments, loss of power, fires and massive shipboard casualties. At 1247, a spark ignited the gasoline vapors leaking from the ship's damaged aviation tanks causing an immense explosion and further loss of life.

Cmdr. Arthur Jay White of West Leipsic, Ohio, Lexington's senior medical officer, was attending to casualties in the sick bay when the explosion thrust him ten feet through the passageway against the bulkhead. He fractured his right shoulder and suffered severe lacerations and two sprained ankles. Despite acute pain, White remained at his station ordering personnel to put on their gas masks before working with his medical team to evacuate casualties to the upper decks.

After the first torpedo hit, the senior dental officer, Cmdr. Wadsworth Trojakowski of New York, New York, took charge of the emergency dressing station on the main deck. Trojakowski was a 17-year veteran of the Navy whose operationally rich career included duty with the Marines in Nicaragua and service as dental officer with Yangtze River Patrol. His life would come to a premature end when a shell tore through the dressing station killing him instantly.

As casualties were ushered to the flight deck, they were met by Pharmacist's Mate Second Class Virgil Weeks of Athens, West Virginia. Weeks helped to render first aid with complete disregard for his own safety as explosions erupted throughout the ship. When Lexington began to list and "All Hands" were ordered to abandon ship, he helped evacuate the tired, exhausted and injured Sailors onto life rafts until being killed by shrapnel.

White and his medical team continued to attend to patients and supervise their evacuation to rescue vessels. The medical officer remained behind until finally forced to evacuate as a patient.

The Saga of the Neosho:



On the morning of May 7, 1942, a Japanese reconnaissance aircraft spotted the destroyer USS Sims (DD-409) and the fleet oiler USS Neosho (AO-23). Over the next five hours these ships were targets of relentless waves of aerial attacks from Japanese fleet carriers Shokaku and Zuikaku leading to the sinking of the Sims (at 1230) and ultimately the scuttling of the Neosho.

At 1201, Neosho received a series of direct hits from enemy dive bombers. When the ship began to list, Capt. John Phillips, Neosho's Commanding Officer (CO), ordered all hands to "Prepare to abandon Ship, but not to abandon until ordered."

In the chaos of the moment, survivors of the attack, including the injured who were still ambulatory, prematurely abandoned ship. Phillips ordered that two motor whale boats be lowered and collect the personnel and life rafts. The boats loaded as many of the Sailors as possible before returning to the Neosho that afternoon.

When personnel returned to the ship, Phillips had a muster conducted. One officer and 19 men were dead while four officers and 154 men were still missing. Among the latter was the ship's medical officer Lt.(j.g.) John D. Greathouse of Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Pharmacist's Mate Third Class Henry Warren Tucker of Birmingham, Alabama.

What the CO did not know at the time was that Tucker had been seen in the water tending to the casualties aboard the life rafts. Without a life preserver, and with little thought for his own personal safety, the corpsman swam between the life rafts carrying tannic acid to treat the burn cases. Earlier, when the whale boats arrived, he helped load the more severely injured men onto the vessels but declined rescue stating he was of "greater use where he was" despite suffering extreme exhaustion. Tucker was never seen again and was presumed dead.

With Greathouse missing in action, Chief Pharmacist's Mate Robert Hoag assisted by Pharmacist's Mate First Class William J. Ward of Dallas, Texas, coolly oversaw of the medical care of crew despite less than favorable conditions. Their actions in administering to the casualties were later described as "unceasing," and each demonstrated tremendous skill, resourcefulness in "keeping the injured personnel alive and comfortable."

POSTSCRIPT:

The Battle of the Coral Sea proved a strategic victory for the U.S. Navy and kept the once unstoppable Japanese juggernaut in check. The damage inflicted on the Japanese carriers Shokaku and Zuikaku ensured they were not used in the penultimate Battle of Midway in June 1942.

Cmdr. Trojakowski and Pharmacist's Mate Second Class Virgil Weeks were among the Lexington's 216 Sailors killed in action. Weeks was posthumously awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for his actions.

While recuperating from his injuries at Naval Hospital San Diego, Dr. Arthur White was awarded the Navy Cross for his efforts aboard Lexington. White later recommended that his entire medical staff (including two other physicians, two dentists, and 21 hospital corpsmen) receive commendations stating that "All were tireless in treating first and second-degree burns, shrapnel wounds, contusions, lacerations, blast injuries and simple and compound fractures."

White was retired for "reasons of physical disability" in 1947, but was recalled briefly to active duty (1948-1950). In his retirement, he was promoted to the rank of Rear Admiral. He died in 1957 at the Naval Hospital Annapolis and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery (Section 30 Site 1940).

Chief Robert Hoag and PhM1c William Ward were both awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Medal for their actions. In 1943, Hoag was commissioned an Ensign in the Hospital Corps. He retired as a lieutenant in the Medical Service Corps in 1951.

Lt (j.g.) John Greathouse, the physician missing in action, was later discovered to have been killed in the attack.

Pharmacist's Mate Third Class Henry Tucker was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross for his "loyal and courageous devotion to duty." In 1944, he was honored as the namesake for the Gearing-Class destroyer USS Tucker (DD-875), which served with distinction in the Korean War and Vietnam.

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